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Title:
Speech at luncheon, Enfield ALP Clubrooms

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SPEECH BY THE PREMIER, MR. DUNSTAN, AT LUNCHEON, ENFIELD A.L.P.
CLUBROOMS. 20.3.75.

Jack, ladies and gentlemen :

Thank you very much for inviting me to be with you today. It's great that so many people were able to get along to the Club and I'm especially pleased to see so many senior citizens and ladies in the audience.

I know that not all of you are Labor Party members or even necessarily Labor Party voters, so I won't make a highly political speech.

Instead I'd like to take a few moments briefly to discuss something which I believe is important to all of us and particularly to people who have to balance a family budget or keep within a pension.

● a very large extent what happens to a State's economy and to price levels within it is - at least in the short run - beyond a State Government's control. We can have some effect but it's marginal.

There is, however, one area in which we can act - by passing legislation to ensure that to the maximum extent possible shoppers can get value for money.

And that's exactly what we've been doing for the past five years and what we're still doing.

We now have in South Australia the most effective system of consumer protection in the world - a kind of grand shopper's charter.

● was vital that we did so. This is not to say that shopkeepers, finance companies and other traders are all rogues and conmen. They're obviously not - and the vast majority are as outraged as the rest of us by the actions of a handful of the unscrupulous villains.

The problem really was that until we moved to change the law - after a very detailed, lengthy and authoritative study - the system worked against the buyers.

Consumer purchases used to be confined mainly to low priced daily necessities. Today they can be complex transactions for high priced goods of sophisticated manufacture often obtained through very involved credit contracts.

There's also the matter of today's very sophisticated advertising techniques and the need to be able to select in a meaningful way from the battery of conflicting claims made by manufacturers.

Shoppers have to make these choices in circumstances where it can be very difficult for them to make meaningful decisions and where the seller will be familiar with a very involved law and where they won't be.

In other words what was originally conceived to be an equal situation between buyer and seller, these days is far from it. There's no equality of bargaining strength between an individual shopper unaware of the possible complexities of his dealing and a large, sophisticated, commercial organisation.

The State Government has acted to redress the balance.

And we've had spectacular success - in terms of people's wellbeing and in terms of cold hard dollars and cents.

Let me give you an outline of what we've done.

The Prices Commissioner has been renamed the Commissioner of Prices and Consumer Affairs - to point up the importance of his protection work - and given more staff and new powers to do the job.

He can investigate complaints about goods and services and, where justified, seek redress. If necessary, he can take legal action on behalf of the consumer at the State's expense.

This alone has given shopper's very real and significant protection which they've never had before.

In addition, there are specific controls in a number of other areas of crucial importance to people in their daily lives.

The law governing the sale of secondhand cars and the disclosure of defects or the provision of proper guarantees has been an outstanding success.

People buying a house - the most important single transaction any of us will make - now have the protection of an initial cooling-off period if they are forced to change their minds. The system of Builder's Licensing which the Government has brought in provide a measure of protection against shonky workmanship.

There are now laws safeguarding buyers against abuses through door to door sales, from unordered goods, against misrepresentation, misleading advertising and so on.

There has been a major reform of credit laws so that people now have to be told specifically what they are letting themselves in for. They have legal rights, guarantees and protections that ensure fair dealing.

And we haven't stopped there. Parliament has just been considering a new measure to ensure that manufacturers are liable for the quality of goods retailed in South Australia and where appropriate, for the availability of spare parts.

We're going to act also to provide adequate protection for tenants against landlords and again to ensure that the present imbalance is redressed.

These new laws have had a remarkable effect.

Their very existence goes a long way to eliminate abuses - any trader who might be tempted to cheat will certainly think twice knowing he may incur the wrath of the Commissioner for his pains.

It's meant that people can buy a car, a colour t.v., get them serviced or repaired or, indeed, make their everyday purchases with that much more confidence.

It means, too, the ordinary merchant or trader is protected. The laws which require fair dealing protect him in his livelihood and reputation from the depredations of the villain.

It's impossible to put a figure on how much the legislation has been worth to South Australians - it must be literally millions.

But there's one figure we can ascertain and that alone - apart from the deterrent effect - would amply justify what we have done.

Last year the Prices and Consumer Affairs Branch directly saved South Australians \$348,000. That's the value of the reductions or refunds obtained, the additional goods or services supplied, taken back and replaced or transactions cancelled.

I think you'll agree that it's a hefty sum and represents real value to the community.

We've been able to do so much - and as I said we're now the world leader - in very large measure thanks to the efforts of Len King, as Attorney-General and Price Minister.

He's the architect of the new laws, and he's been dedicated and tireless in his determination to get them into law. In his work of the past five years he's become the shopper's friend.

We are, as I said, continuing our legislative programme.

We are also widening the scope of consumer protection in another way - by getting the message across as hard as we can.

A problem in the past has been that very many people who would most benefit from advice and information either don't know it's available or find out too late.

We're getting over that by a whole informational effort through education programmes, films, publications and a whole range of public relations techniques.

For instance, one area where the record of people being taken down is very bad indeed is among migrants.

Every M.P. knows of many and shocking cases where migrants have been exploited and cheated often out of very large sums because of their lack of fluency in English or lack of knowledge of the law.

It has been a scandal and a disgrace.

For this reason the Branch has just published Greek and Italian translations of its Guide to Consumer Protection.

They explain in clear, colloquial language the safeguards now available to people under the law.

About 10,000 of each have been printed so that it can get the widest circulation.

I've spoken on this subject at length because, of course, it's something of which my Government is very proud and because I think it's important that as many people as possible know about it.

The task of properly protecting citizens from evils against which they cannot separately protect themselves is a primary responsibility of Government's. And it's one we have been determined to discharge.

Thank You.

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